Police victims of domestic abuse: barriers to reporting victimisation

Leticia Couto, Nicola O'Leary & Iain Brennan

Published online: 24 Aug 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 244

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Police victims of domestic abuse: barriers to reporting victimisation

Leticia Couto, Nicola O'Leary and Iain Brennan

University of Hull, Hull, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Policing is the institution responsible for protecting victims of domestic abuse and the institution to which victimisation is formally reported. The police workforce, therefore, are routinely exposed to domestic abuse victimisation, perpetration and its consequences. When police themselves become victims of domestic abuse, the interaction between personal and professional identity and cultures may exacerbate the harms of victimisation and discourage victims from reporting victimisation. In this study, we describe themes that emerged from accounts of reporting and not reporting domestic abuse by police officers and staff in an English police force. Through the lenses of victimology theory and police culture theory, we describe how there appears to be few protective components of working in policing and several adverse consequences for victims. Reporting was impeded by difficulty recognising abuse and experiencing feelings of shame in a way similar to that of many non-police victims. These common obstacles were exacerbated by a conflict between police and victim identities, by significant concern about formal and informal violations of privacy by colleagues and by worry about potential damage to their career. These challenges were particularly acute when the perpetrator also worked in policing. The paper concludes with a call for researchers, policy makers and policing to recognise and respond to the unique vulnerabilities inherent in the police-victim overlap.

Introduction

Domestic abuse is experienced across age, ethnicity and gender in patterned ways but there is limited understanding of how exposure to and experience of domestic abuse might vary by occupation (Office for National Statistics 2021, Dheensa *et al*. 2022). Some jobs, such as policing, could influence a person's perception and response to domestic abuse due to frequent exposure to victims, perpetrators and abusive behaviour (HMICFRS 2021) or to the gendered construction of their professional identity. When police employees become victims, a blurring of the line between guardian and victim may create an obstacle to their seeking help from colleagues or reporting their victimisation to the police.

This paper sheds light on the experiences of police officers and staff who have been victims of domestic abuse placing a particular focus on their reporting of that abuse. It complements our paper that describes the prevalence and patterns of domestic abuse victimisation in policing

---

(Brennan *et al.* 2023). Using qualitative data from the same anonymous survey undertaken in a police force in England, the study identifies challenges and harm unique to victims who work in policing. These include competing professional and victim identities, explicit and implicit organisational pressures that are unaccepting of victimisation, concerns over privacy violations, worry about mistreatment by colleagues and inadequate support from their employer. These challenges were frequently exacerbated if the perpetrator was also a colleague. In recognition of the unique circumstances that police face when they become victims of crime, we end the paper by calling for further research on the police-victim overlap.

Policing and victimisation – a neglected overlap

Police officers who commit crime have received extensive attention in the literature and the issue a prominent concern in the UK policing agenda (HMICFRS 2022). However, crime against police employees (officers and staff[1]) has received comparatively limited attention, especially from a victimological and procedural perspective. Recently, the issue of police-perpetrated domestic abuse has gained attention, but only as a passive element in the examination of police-perpetrated crime (Home Office 2023a, 2023b). The few instances where a police-victim overlap has been considered in the literature have focused on workplace violence (Ellrich and Baier 2016, Reynolds *et al.* 2021), hate crime (Mawby and Zempi 2018) or victimisation due to occupation (Sal 2002, Kilatya and Kavivya 2021). Notably, these are all crimes perpetrated by strangers. When the victimisation of police employees has been addressed, it has mostly been framed as stress or trauma (Xu, 2022) to be treated with clinical solutions (Reiser and Geiger 1984, Anderson and Bauer 1987), rather than addressing its structural causes, such as a masculinised workplace cultures or procedural harms. With a specific focus on domestic abuse, despite there being clear potential for conflict of interest, violations of privacy, abuse of power and gender imbalance in experience, there is no published research about the experience of police employees accessing the very services they provide or exploring the conflicting identities of being simultaneously a victim of domestic abuse and a police employee. Needless to say, the intersection between gendered exposure to domestic abuse and gendered policing identity is also absent from the literature. This paper begins the process of filling these gaps.

To add an element of jeopardy to our discussion of police reporting of domestic abuse, we note that the police-victim overlap may have been neglected because it is not a harmful interaction worthy of focus. For example, a police employee's unique position of being a service provider that becomes a service user means they will have a heightened awareness of the law and familiarity with police procedure that could mitigate the harm of being a victim and ease the process of disclosing victimisation. Although a link between knowledge of the law and familiarity with process has received little attention, preliminary results point towards a positive relationship (Kim & Ferrararesso, 2022) that may explain the police-victim overlap not being an issue worthy of attention.

Role conflict in other professions

The healthcare literature provides insights into the experience of service providers – doctors – becoming service users – patients. Thompson *et al.* (2001) found that cultural barriers, such as a persona of invincibility and a professional status that inhibits treatment-seeking and dismisses privacy concerns discouraged medical practitioners from seeking treatment. Fox *et al.* (2009) described a stressful work environment that overlooked or discounted illness and identified difficulties that arose from role ambiguity in the doctor-patient relationship. When doctors did seek help for a health problem, the discomfort that resulted from this role ambiguity undermined the doctor-patient relationship and had an adverse effect on their treatment (Fox *et al.* 2009).

These professional obstacles to help-seeking identified in doctors will resonate with those familiar with policing, where individual wellbeing is discounted in favour of 'the job' and identities of

invincibility, synonymous with a hypermasculine work environment, are commonplace (Reiner 2000, Loftus 2010, Brown *et al*. 2020). Despite these similarities, there are limits in the extent to which we can extrapolate from healthcare professionals using healthcare services into police using police services. For example, individuals with serious health issues must consider different factors in their decision to disclose illness or seek treatment and the consequences of their help-seeking are usually personal rather than affecting another party. In contrast, not reporting victimisation to the police is the most common response of victims and reporting has direct consequences for others in a way that health problems typically do not. Despite the imperfect alignment of these dual-role issues, the literature provides a useful starting point for exploring police reporting of victimisation and suggests that occupational identity can affect engaging with the service one routinely provides.

Reporting domestic abuse in the general population

Although most domestic abuse victims disclose their abuse to someone, they are most likely to do this informally, such as to a friend or family member (ONS 2022a, 2022b). The vast majority – around 85% – do not report the abuse to police (ibid.). There are many factors that influence domestic abuse victims' not reporting their abuse to the police. These include not recognising the abuse for what it is (Boethius and Åkerström 2020), feeling shame or embarrassment for being a victim (ONS 2022a, 2022b) and past negative experiences with the criminal justice system (Kunst *et al*. 2015). Victims may also fear the consequences of reporting the abuse, such as an unwanted arrest of the perpetrator or retaliation from the abuser in a variety of forms (Reich *et al*. 2022) and may also fear not being believed (Stalans and Finn 2006, Epstein and Goodman 2019).

Reporting may also be impacted by perceptions of victimhood or what an 'ideal victim' is (Christie 1986) and the extent to which they fit this model (Duggan 2018). Their identity and perceived 'worthiness' as a victim depend on how others subjectively perceive the victimisation experience or on how the person thinks others would perceive it (Christie 1986). Consequently, if a victim feels they do not fit the societal image of a victim, they may choose not to report. This body of literature highlights the complex and multi-faceted nature of reporting among domestic abuse victims and notes the many challenges that a victim faces in having their victimisation validated and in seeking help, formally and informally.

Police culture, stoicism and vulnerability

As with the more commonly discussed victim-offender overlap, the concept of a police-victim overlap brings together contrasting ideas and stereotypes. There is the 'ideal victim' who is virtuous, unambiguously blameless and vulnerable whilst also being devoid of the means or knowledge to protect themselves from harm and, in Christie's vignette, the victim is female. The perpetrator is typically male and the vulnerability tends to be physical rather than, for example, psychological. In contrast to the ideal victim, the stereotypical police officer is stoic in the face of danger and stress, invulnerable to physical threat, typically male or at least masculine (Westmarland 2001, 2017) and knowledgeable about procedure for dealing with crime (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991). Of course, these are vignettes and stereotypes and there is a wealth of literature that shows exceptions. For example, police officers are clearly damaged by stress and trauma (Purba and Demou 2019), they experience physical harm more than any other profession (Health and Safety Executive, 2020), one-third in the UK are female (Home Office 2023a, 2023b) and procedures for dealing with crimes are often complex, contextual and prone to change. Similarly, the characteristics of victims, including those experiencing domestic abuse, frequently deviate from a stereotypically virtuous female who is assaulted by a physically stronger male (ONS 2022a, 2022b) and the abuse is often a course of coercive and controlling behaviour as well as, or instead of isolated physical incidents.

Long-held identities and stereotypes are gradually being eroded by changing cultural and organisational initiatives that seek to recognise the impact of workplace trauma (Foley, Hassett and Williams, 2022), to overcome stereotypes of victims and their behaviour (Brennan *et al*. 2021), to address gender imbalance and identity in policing (Brown and Silvestri 2019) and to normalise help-seeking following workplace trauma (Edwards and Kotera 2021). Despite these improvements, progress is slow and it is likely that inaccurate and reductionist ideas about victims still abound within policing (Myhill 2019). When these identities are strongly held within a society or an organisation, even those who are directly harmed by them may hold these views and come to feel shame (Edwards and Kotera 2021) or self-blame (Miller and Porter 1983, Pereira *et al*. 2020) for contradicting or failing to embody these stereotypes. In the case of policing, where policing identity and victim identities are often incompatible, it is inevitable that a conflict will emerge in those who experience victimisation. However, the extent to which this becomes problematic or is resolved (and how) is unknown, as is the extent to which this dual-identity conflict limits a police officers' use of procedure to protect themselves and reduce their exposure to future harm.

The decision to report – the case of police employees

As noted, the decision to report domestic abuse can be complex and influenced by various factors, including the characteristics of the abuse, perceived shame and stigma and societal views of blame attribution. In the case of police employees, their unique position as both a service provider and a victim may create additional obstacles to reporting their own abuse. Workplace dynamics, police culture and how colleagues treat domestic abuse cases may also play a role in the decision to report or not. The views and assumptions developed by police officers about what it means to be a victim and the perception of victims by their colleagues and the organisation may also influence this decision. These views are often highly gendered (Javaid 2020) and can conflict with male and female police identities (Westmarland 2017). Internal workplace dynamics, such as organisational culture (Hoyle 1998) and relationships with colleagues, supervisors and senior management, may also impact on a police victim's decision to report domestic abuse. The internal environment can either reinforce a culture of respect and care or threaten the victim's perception of the workplace, which in turn can affect their identification with the organisation and their views of senior management (Loftus 2010). The actions of the person to whom the abuse is reported can also play a significant role in this process, as they can either support or ignore the victimisation claims. Finally, the close-knit policing community means that many victims of domestic abuse will also know other victims of abuse among their colleagues. If that reporting has not been handled well or there have been negative personal or professional consequences as a result of having disclosed abuse, it may have suppressed help-seeking by other victims, creating a hidden epidemic of unrecognised abuse and harm within their workforce.

Disclosure of police-perpetrated domestic abuse

In addition to the potential added harms created by the police-victim overlap, harm could be further compounded by the abuser also being a police officer or staff. An abuser may continue the abuse at work removing any sanctuary effects of the workplace (MacGregor *et al*. 2022). Abusers may make pre-emptory counter-allegations against the victim (Burman and Brooks-Hay 2018), undermine their mental health, identity and credibility (Stark 2018) or use their access to police records to control the victim or their colleagues. Furthermore, abusers may be familiar with the locations of domestic abuse shelters or support agencies, removing a potential source of support for victims. Victims may also believe, or know, that they would encounter strong resistance from the police force if they were to accuse their partners (Wetendorf and Davis, 2015) and the decision to report police-perpetrated abuse may be affected by the threat of economic consequences of their partners losing their income (Reich *et al*. 2022).

In summary, based on evidence from other occupations and from the general population of victims, it is reasonable to speculate that police who are victims of domestic abuse may be at heightened risk of harm as a result of dual-role conflict or organisational response to their abuse. These harms can be in terms of identity where an 'invincible' occupational identity conflicts with constructions of a vulnerable 'ideal' victim. Harms can also be practical if police members are discouraged from disclosing abuse because of their dual-role conflict, concerns over privacy or damage to their professional identity. In particular, if the perpetrator is also a member of the police workforce, victims who seek help must overcome a strong workplace culture that discourages reporting illegal behaviour by a colleague and the consequences of doing so.

Noting the relative absence of literature on these issues, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of domestic abuse in police workforce, through a victimisation lens. More specifically, this study intended to explore police employees accounts of reporting domestic abuse to colleagues or a line manager.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative data extracted from a survey undertaken in a police force in England. More details on sampling and descriptive statistics can be found in an accompanying paper (Brennan *et al*. 2023) but we present an overview of the sample distribution here. Although the qualitative responses employed in this paper were not weighted, we present the weighted sample to maintain the anonymity of the police force. The weighted number of respondents was 876 of whom 47% were female and 60% were police officers. The median age band was 41–45 years and the median band for length of service was 11–15 years. Of this total sample, 193 (22%) reported being a victim of domestic abuse[2] while working for the police force; 114 of whom were female and 79 were male. In response to a closed question[3], the types of abuse experienced included emotional/psychological, sexual, physical and financial.

The survey was developed by the police force and delivered via an online survey tool. The survey consisted of a mix of closed and open-ended questions, with mandatory completion of all closed response items. The open-ended questions allowed for deeper investigation of responses, but also meant that the number of participants answering each question varied. The flow of questions is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The three main themes of the open-ended questions related to a colleague's experience of abuse, personal experience of abuse and suggestions for how the force could further support officers and staff suffering from domestic abuse. As the survey was developed to
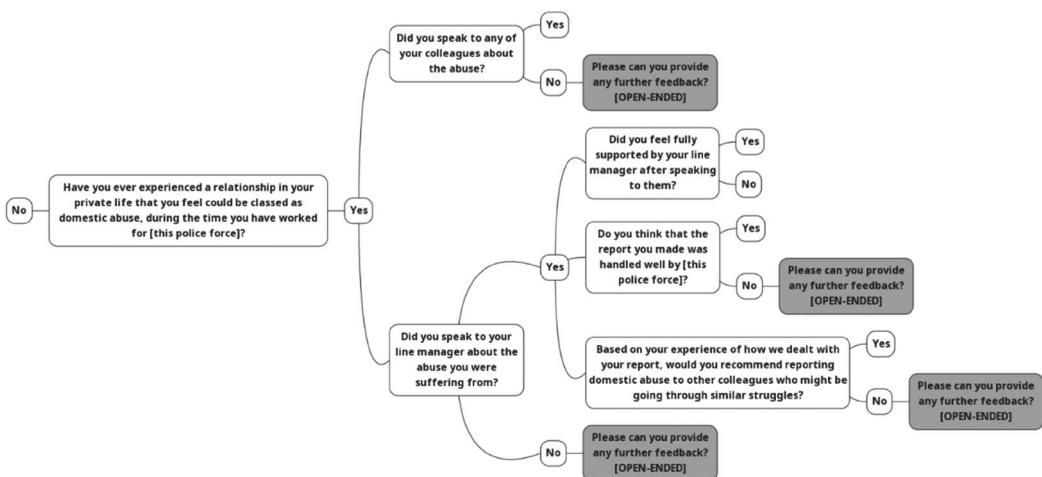

Figure 1. Survey flowchart.

understand internal processes, it was structured to focus on understanding negative outcomes rather than positive ones. Accordingly, questions asked about why victims chose not to speak with their colleagues and line managers about the abuse, why they felt the report was not handled well, and why, based on their experience, they would not recommend reporting to other colleagues who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

Sampling and procedure

An invitation to complete the survey was sent to all police officers and staff who were employed by a single police force in England. The recruitment email explained that the survey was anonymous and was designed to understand vicarious and direct experience of domestic abuse within the workforce. The survey was open between January 26th, 2021, and July 13th, 2021, and was answered by a weighted sample of 876 police employees, which reflects around 25% of the total workforce.[4] The data were made available to the authors through a data processing agreement with the police force that stipulated that the force should remain anonymous. With this agreement in place, due to the secondary nature of the data set and the lack of personal data therein, the requirement for ethical approval by University of Hull was waived.

The present study focused on the section relating to personal experience of abuse, thus the sample was limited to the 197 respondents (22% of the total sample) who indicated that they had experienced domestic abuse. Respondents were not required to answer all open questions, resulting in varying numbers of respondents for each question. Seventy-five respondents provided feedback on why they did not speak to a colleague about their abuse (a response rate of 71% for eligible victims). Ninety-six respondents provided feedback on why they did not speak to a line manager about their abuse (86% of eligible victims). Fifty-eight respondents provided feedback on why they thought their reporting was not well-handled by the force (84% of eligible victims[5]); 85 who indicated that they would not recommend that a colleague reported their abuse also provided feedback (83% of the eligible respondents).

Respondents in this sample self-identified as victims of domestic abuse. Although sampling through self-identification is common practice in survey-based research, it is not without issue, particularly when the topic is the highly-gendered phenomenon of domestic abuse victimisation. As noted above, males accounted for 40% of the self-reported victims in the sample, which is ten percentage points higher than observed in the general population (ONS 2022a, 2022b). Several studies have observed invalid claims of victimisation among male survey respondents (Gadd *et al*. 2003) and that male experience of domestic abuse victimisation often differs from that of females in terms of harm, reciprocity and longevity of the abuse. It is likely that our data set has some similar features that may be less or more extreme that those observed in the general population of self-identifying victims. There is no way to verify differences in experience of domestic abuse within the sample. However, it is plausible that respondents who were malingering as victims would complete the qualitative sections of the survey at a lower rate than those who were not malingering. A comparison of male and female response patterns indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of males and females who responded to each item highlighted in Figure 1. While this is an imperfect test and a variety of competing explanations could be offered in explanation, male respondents were able to provide accounts of their reporting experience. With this in mind, and as this sample is, if not unique, extremely rare, we chose to accept the self-reported victim status on face value and to not apply any additional selection criteria to inclusion in the data set. The implications of this decision are discussed below.

Analytic strategy

The answers from the survey's open-ended questions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Although the survey did not have questions specifically asking police employees to describe or

attribute meaning to their dual identity as victims of domestic abuse and police employees, nor about the hurdles of disclosing the abuse, these were two themes inferred from the analysis of the data within the overarching theme about the personal experiences of abuse. It is also note-worthy that the questions were designed to be gender neutral which, when combined with the small number of items, prevented taking a more gendered approach to exploring the topic than was desirable. We discuss the implications of this below.

As argued by Terry and Hayfield (2021), Thematic Analysis (TA) does not have any restrictions regarding the maximum size of the sample, so it is suitable for large datasets such as those origi-nated by qualitative surveys, or surveys with qualitative sections. Additionally, the flexible appli-cation of TA meant that although inductive analysis was the main approach used, some deductive analysis was also applied to identify reasons for not disclosing the abuse commonly addressed in the literature. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2022), coding and theme development can encompass both types, with the range from inductive to deductive acting as more of a spectrum than a dichotomy.

Due to the nature of the data and the aims of this study, an essentialist analytic approach was followed, interpreting meaning mainly on the semantic level, albeit with some aspects being further explored on the latent level as well. The data was initially organised by the predetermined topics informed by the data collection questions. The first author led the analysis, by coding the data and clustering the themes into initial thematic patterns. After all authors familiarised themselves with the data, the themes were further reviewed by all researchers to ensure important aspects of the data related to the subject were not left out, i.e. that the analysis provided a thorough and meaningful account of the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). In the data analysis, quotations are presented with the sex and occupation of the participant the quote belongs to. All potentially identifiable information were removed from the quotes.

Results

The major themes that emerged from the analysis related to: recognising abuse; dual-identity conflict; the intrusive influence of police culture on victim behaviour; and the difficulties in reporting abuse to supervisors. Evidence for these themes is presented below and discussed in light of existing literature.

Identifying and accepting the abuse for what it is

> I wasn't aware of it at the time. It is hard to see from an outside perspective […]. [male, police officer]

Some participants further explained how they were only able to understand/make sense of what they had gone through after getting some emotional distance, for example, after some time dealing with the abuse, after the relationship had already ended or after participating in a domestic abuse course.

> I kept it to myself as I didn't see it at the time, and it wasn't until the relationship was over that I realised how bad things were. [female, police officer]

> It was my daughter that went through the abuse and only when I attended a DA [domestic abuse] class with her did I realise that I had suffered the same in my life. [female, police staff]

> At the time of the abuse, I was blinded and did not realize how much he controlled me. We suffered many marital issues which I confided in my colleagues, but no one identified the abuse and advised me. Eventually I saw the wood from the trees and threw him out of my life and filed for divorce. [female, police staff]

Consistent with victims in the general public, recognising the abuse appears to have been more difficult when the abuse experienced was not physical. Some participants also added that even if

they had recognised the coercive control they were experiencing, they would not be able to report it as it was not criminalised at the time.

> Didn't feel it was DA at the time, coercive control wasn't an offence then, only afterwards was it pointed out to me when I explained what went on in the relationship that I had been in a toxic and controlling relationship. [female, police officer]

Another officer benchmarked the abuse she was suffering against the emotional abuse she had witnessed in her professional life and discounted her own experience.

> As a police officer I found it difficult to accept that what was happening was a form of domestic abuse. […] I investigated abuse and because what I was suffering wasn't physical it was hard to accept it was domestic abuse. [female, police officer]

Even in those cases where the abuse was at some level recognised for what it is during the relationship, some respondents explained how they spent some time in denial in the hope that the abuse would come to an end.

> I think I was in denial about it. [female, police staff]

> I buried my head in the sand in the hope that it would go away. [male, police staff]

A common theme within domestic abuse literature is the difficulty victims have in recognising their experience as abuse (Pitman 2017, Boethius and Åkerström 2020, Reich *et al*. 2022). This was also the case in this police sample, suggesting that when abuse happened in their private lives, their professional knowledge and experience in identifying the signs of abuse were redundant. Indeed, as illustrated above, being exposed to extreme domestic abuse – exemplified by the need for police intervention – may set a very high benchmark for what constitutes abuse resulting in discounting their own experience as abusive or criminal.

'Guardian, guard thyself' – the shame and stigma of vulnerability in policing

Participants expressed not wanting to disclose the abuse because they did not believe others would understand what they are/were going through or felt/feel embarrassed about it.

> Didn't trust anybody and thought they wouldn't understand. […] Without the physical signs who was going to believe or understand. [female, police staff]

> […] There is a shame that you are 'letting' someone treat you so badly that you don't want to admit it. [female, police staff]

A clear conflict was evident between a stoic and 'invulnerable' policing identity and a victim's realisation that they are vulnerable to victimisation and may need help. The police identity appeared to generate feelings of embarrassment about being a victim of domestic abuse which deterred the reporting of abuse. As some participants mentioned, although police culture changed over time and domestic abuse progressively started to be taken more seriously, there were still significant obstacles hindering the disclosure of abuse. These included a culture of not discussing personal issues, a need to show they can take care of themselves and an implicit assumption they should know what to do when victimised.

> […] There probably has been a culture officers not sharing their own concerns due to the role of a police officer. I think police officers previously would be less likely to disclose then other members of the public. A lot has changed over the years, but the culture still exists. Having a means to break down those initial fears of seeking help is essential and we are not there yet in this police force. [male, police officer]

> An officers home matters are not considered important by the organisation. I have witnessed officers and staff being criticised for personal problems affecting them at work instead of being supported. [male, police officer]

> Don't assume as you work in a police force a colleague knows what to do. [When] they do that makes it twice as tough, it's more overwhelming and harder to report if you work in a police force than if you worked in any other

company or unemployed. There is a stigma that you would do the right thing, we all know what that is but that's double shame, double guilt and twice as much pressure. [female, police staff]

To some, being a police employee victim of domestic abuse represented a vulnerability that they may not be willing to reveal. When they consider disclosing the victimisation, some have expressed going through the process of dissociating their two contrasting identities.

I thought that by discussing my situation, it would be a sign of personal weakness. [male, police officer]

Found very difficult to really trust and someone to actually listen and peel away the onion layers so only a layer would be spoken about and the rest hidden. [female, police staff]

[…] The truth is you have to put yourself on the other side of the enquiry desk and leave your ID and be the person on your birth certificate not the ID badge and the job role employed in a force. [female, police staff]

The embarrassment felt due to being a domestic abuse victim, appears to be further expanded due to their workplace identity as a police employee, i.e. being a police employee working with domestic abuse victims seems to add an additional barrier to reporting. Some participants feared the disclosure of being a victim of domestic abuse would in some way hinder other people's perceptions in terms of their ability to conduct their job.

I was embarrassed and ashamed of the fact I was dealing with DV related incidents at work yet couldn't solve my own issues. [female, police officer]

I felt that coming forward I would been seen as failing within my professional life as at the time I had the belief that we sort out and support victims of DA and I felt embarrassed about being talked about through canteen gossip. I also thought it was my issue and mine alone to sort – a belief now which I do not hold. [male, police officer]

I spoke to my friends and colleagues but not line manager through fear they would think my ability to do my job was compromised. [female, police staff]

Being a police officer or staff member impacted on recognising, labelling and responding to the abuse they experienced – in general, their conflicting identities seems to have had adverse effects on each stage of the process. It amplified the reasons many victims have for not reporting, such as feeling shame and stigma but also closed off the routes to disclosing vulnerability through occupational risk and a perception on invincibility.

The collision of private and work lives – the issue of canteen gossip and having the perpetrator as co-worker

If a police member or staff lives within their own force area, they may have to report domestic abuse at their workplace, to the same people they work with. As participants indicated, having to mix both spheres to disclose such a personal and private issue added a layer of difficulty that in many cases was enough to discourage reporting. Some also reiterated not wanting to bring their private life to work out of fear of damaging their career and/or the way they are viewed by others.

At work I wore a mask as it was the only 'normal' environment and felt safe, did not want to blur the two worlds and be judged, shamed, and have my personal life exposed. Wanted to be judged at work for being the person at work not a person at work with baggage. [female, police staff]

Didn't want them to know about my private life or get them involved. [female, police officer]

The issue of having to mix both private and work spheres was further exacerbated when the abuser was also a police employee. Some participants explained how they had their every move controlled even at work. In such cases, the opportunities to disclose the abuse became significantly reduced and reporting became an almost unfeasible task. Adding to this, participants also indicated

fearing not being believed over their partner who may have friends of higher rank or be more popular.

> I was told many times, no one would believe me over him. [female, police officer]

> I would not have been believed over someone who presented to others as popular and agreeable. I would have been seen as a liar and been isolated and bullied by his friends. [female, police officer]

Adding to the aforementioned issue of feeling that the abuse was something too private to disclose, especially in their place of work, frequently participants expressed significant concerns, about their disclosure of abuse not being kept confidential both at the organisational and individual level, and of their abuse being spread through canteen gossip.

> More discretion is needed, as the fear of people finding out prevents reporting in the first place. [female, police officer]

> […] There is also something of a 'gossip culture' in the Police Service so I didn't feel comfortable that any conversation would remain confidential. [male, police officer]

> Supervisors like to gossip too, heard it and seen it. I didn't [report] because I didn't have confidence in my supervisor to keep this private. [female, police officer]

Obstacles to reporting the abuse to supervisors

For many police victims, reporting their abuse to supervisors and senior management was not seen as a realistic or attractive option. Many respondents did not feel supported by their supervisors nor, as noted previously, confident the issue would remain private were they to report it. Some supervisors were perceived as unapproachable, unsupportive and flippant about domestic abuse issues as well as lacking the experience or skills to provide meaningful support or to deal with the situation.

> For officers working within different departments throughout the Force there is no consideration to these matters, and 90% of line supervisors no longer know their staff well enough as a person to be aware of anything going on in their personal lives. That or there is a severe lack of interest in their staff as a whole. I feel being a survivor of DA [domestic abuse] that there is a severe lack of education surround the subject and there is still a lot of ignorance from officers across the board. I say all of this from my own personal experiences […] [female, police staff]

> I find that our supervisors are unapproachable on most occasions with minor issues let alone with a sensitive or personal matter. […] I find that the supervisors are often disinterested and 'too busy' to listen. [female, police officer]

Respondents also addressed how reporting to supervisors, would mean having police involvement beyond their wishes. As police employees were aware of the established procedures, some participants expressed concerns about the possible consequences following the report, such as the possible impact on themselves, their families and/or the abusive partner which might have lost their job or be dealt with criminally. Even if some supervisors or line managers were supportive and had good working relationships with their team, the lack of desire for any sort of positive action following the disclosure, beyond recording the abuse and being offered support, represented another barrier preventing disclosure of abuse.

> I know supervisors would feel a duty of care to report the matter over and above the wishes of the victim. So, I would not always feel comfortable doing this. [female police officer]

> I did not wish for police involvement due to the impact this would have had on my family and discussing this with my line manager would have resulted in that. [female, police staff]

> […] Due to my ex-partner working within the organization I did not want them to lose their job or be dealt with criminally. The DA Policy at the time meant if I gave an account to the attending patrol, then my ex-partner would have been arrested and their employment in question. I was an emotional wreck and was suffering with anxiety and depression; I just needed support leaving the relationship. [male, police officer]

Discussion

This paper is the first to present qualitative data from police officers and staff about the process of reporting domestic abuse victimisation to colleagues, line managers and the institution of policing. We initially proposed that police officers and staff exposure to domestic abuse, familiarity with the criminal justice processes of reporting and responding to domestic abuse, might affect how they interpret and respondent to domestic abuse, particularly how they report victimisation. We presented competing evidence from the policing and victimisation literature about whether being a member of a police force would impede or facilitate reporting.

The qualitative data analysed and detailed many obstacles to reporting that have been observed in the literature involving victims of domestic abuse in the general population. Reporting was impeded by difficulty recognising abuse and experiencing feelings of shame in a way similar to that of many non-police victims. However, these common obstacles were exacerbated by a conflict between police and victim identities, by significant concern about formal and informal violations of privacy by colleagues and by worry about suffering damage to their career. These challenges were particularly acute when the perpetrator also worked in policing. The sections that follow reflect on these accounts and interpret them through victimological and policing culture lenses.

We suggested that inside knowledge and experience of identifying and dealing with domestic abuse cases could provide a heightened sensitivity to signs of abuse in the lives of police employees, but this did not seem to be the case. Indeed, in police and non-police victims, the process of interpreting domestic abuse victimisation appears to be similar. Like non-police victims in the literature (Boethius and Akerstrom 2020) police respondents alluded to not identifying their experience as domestic abuse, especially when it involved less visible forms of abuse, such as controlling or coercive behaviour. Police respondents also described feeling the shame that many non-police victims report (ONS 2022a, 2022b) alongside negative past experience of criminal justice process or were fearful of what engaging with that process would hold. Our interpretation of these observations is that police victims, much like other victims, were applying an 'ideal victim' frame to understanding their own experience, which then influenced decisions about reporting. However, we posit that the police image of an 'ideal victim' is affected by experience and identity conflicts unique to policing which may not match the same 'ideal victim' expectations held by members of the general public. We suggest this for two reasons. As police contact is often a 'last resort' for many victims, the sample of the population to which police officers and staff are exposed is likely to be different and arguably more extreme than that to which the general public is exposed; this creates a 'jaundiced' view of the world (Loftus 2010: 13). Therefore, it is possible that the prototype of a domestic abuse victim held by police is not the same as that held by the general public and the threshold for being a 'true victim' of domestic abuse and what deserves police attention may be higher for police than for the general public. Secondly, as we theorised, consistent with research on police identity (Loftus 2010, Westmarland 2017), police officers and staff retained a police identity that did not sit comfortably alongside a victim identity. Regardless of gender, the police persona they sought to project was one of invulnerability, resilience and bravery. Clearly, this persona would be contradicted by a disclosure of domestic abuse victimisation and, by extension, vulnerability, which could cause internal conflict and discomfort, as well as their losing control over their professional identity and how they would be perceived by their colleagues.

So far, we have focused on internal reasons, but there was also clear evidence of external and explicit disincentives to not acknowledge victimisation. Respondents documented additional cultural challenges to accepting a victim identity or disclosing victimisation, such as disregard for victims among their colleagues and supervisors which has been previously documented (Grant and Rowe, 2011; HMIC 2014, Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015). Even if extreme attitudes such as disdainful or dismissive responses towards victims are not held by most officers and staff, they resonated with police victims and appear to have had reduced their willingness to disclose or report victimisation. In addition to pejorative attitudes to

domestic abuse victims among some colleagues and supervisors, respondents noted a pattern of organisational disregard for individual welfare that impacted on the decision to report victimisation. Although we cannot determine the prevalence or timing of these attitudes and behaviours among teams and supervisors, they are concerning and contradictory to policing commitments to workforce wellbeing (College of Policing 2018).

In summary, if reporting is, metaphorically, a mountain to be climbed, a biased prototype of victims makes the mountain taller while police identity is a heavy backpack. We expected that this would be the case at an individual level with police seeking to maintain a persona that is stoic, resilient and invulnerable. While this was certainly observed, we underestimated the extent to which colleague and supervisor contempt for the airing of 'personal problems' would exist and, consequently, adversely affect victim's help-seeking or reporting. Although impossible to compare, these organisational factors appear to have been a greater obstacle to help-seeking than any persona. In describing the impact of witnessing line managers and other police colleagues criticise colleagues for disclosing personal problems at work or line managers being dismissive of victims of domestic abuse in the general public, respondents drew a causal link between non-reporting of domestic abuse and police culture that should be examined further as they would undermine any existing organisation-led local efforts to encourage reporting. Should policing seek to address this tendency for their workforce to discount their own victimisation, interventions must not just seek to address how individuals see themselves but also ensuring that the policies and culture of the organisation are receptive to their workforce needing or wanting police support.

At the opening of this paper, we discussed the potential for policing and victimisation to be a harmful mix, but we also alluded to a possibility, via evidence from Kim and Ferraresso (2022) that exposure to victims, perpetrators, legislation and processes of domestic abuse could encourage reporting and be a protective factor against the harms of victimisation. Unfortunately, in this sample, we observed much of the former and little of the latter. Respondents were 'victims first' and 'police second': the additional knowledge and vicarious exposure to domestic abuse appeared to have, at best, no effect but potentially even had harmful effects on police victims' experience of and response to their victimisation experience.

In the instances where the perpetrator was also a police officer or staff member, we observed additional harms experienced by victims. Perpetrators used a range of tactics or victims feared a range of consequences that created obstacles to reporting and the 'sanctuary' that the workplace can present was violated for these victims. At least across this sample, the force was ill-prepared to facilitate reporting of police-perpetrated domestic abuse and to prevent the harm to victims of being controlled or abused both in their private and professional lives. It is not possible to explain the causes of this unpreparedness using the data available to us, but it seems likely that organisational culture and inadequate policies were direct causes of this issue. There have been attempts to address these obstacles to reporting (International Association of Police Chiefs 2003), but if policies to address this were present in our sample police force, they were not widely known or applied.

Limitations

Although novel, this study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample data explicitly excluded the better experiences of police victims but may also exclude the worst. Because the survey only asked respondents to provide feedback on negative experience, the results are disproportionately critical and police who had positive, affirmative experiences were not represented in this sample. This 'conditioning on the dependent' means that our interpretation of the causes of not reporting is potentially biased as we have no way of knowing if these causes, such as police identity, were also present in the group of victims who did report. Simultaneously, as the survey only sampled serving police officers and staff at the time, there is a possibility that those most badly affected by the abuse chose not to complete the survey, were absent from work because of the abuse or

had left the job entirely. Particularly for those victims whose abuser was also a work colleague, this 'survivorship' bias remains a distinct possibility. Additionally, it is possible that some chose not to complete the survey for reasons related to their abuse or lack thereof. Particularly with the qualitative responses, some respondents may not have detailed their experience out of fear that it would compromise their anonymity. Although the aim of the study was not to produce generalisable insights, the adversity bias in the questions and the potential for missing the most extreme cases should be recognised and the findings interpreted accordingly. An additional limitation is that the survey did not clearly distinguish between informal and formal disclosure of abuse. As it only asked participants if they had spoken to a colleague or line manager about the abuse, it was not possible to ascertain potential differences between informal and formal disclosures. Given the blurring of roles that this study exposes, the blurring of formal and informal disclosure is both apposite and limiting. Finally, the secondary nature of the data means that issues such as the role of gender in experience, response and management of reporting could not be examined to the extent that we wished. As noted above, there is convincing evidence that males and females express victimisation and experience domestic abuse in different ways. Survey methods, even ones containing free text sections, can mask a wide diversity in victim experience. For the reasons we detailed earlier, we opted to be liberal in accepting self-reported victimisation in good faith regardless of gender but encourage further research in this area to examine gendered difference in domestic abuse victimisation within policing.

Conclusion

A distinctive aspect of our work was the exploration of the under researched and unique position where the identity of police employee and victim of domestic abuse intersect. We found that police employee insider knowledge did not appear to help them manage their own abuse. On the contrary, police victims faced the same challenges in disclosing domestic abuse as other victims but these challenges were almost always amplified by the dual-role conflict of being both police and victim.

In an earlier section, we alluded to a jeopardy that the police-victim overlap may not have emerged as a concept because it is not useful to describing the police experience. The evidence provided by the respondents clearly disproves that assertion: at least for victims of domestic abuse, there is a harmful additive impact of victimisation while working in policing. Many of the rights and expectations of victims in the general public are not extended to those working in policing and the culture of policing serves to dismiss those rights for both male and female victims.

As the first study to describe accounts of the police-victim overlap, we have demonstrated the psychological and procedural harm when these two identities collide and we feel that this underappreciated phenomenon deserves more attention beyond how it can affect reporting. Our introduction drew upon the experience of doctors' being patients. Our next article, which delves into the broader experience of dual-role conflict will show that the metaphorical 'canteen' is where the parallels between healthcare professional and police help-seeking come to an end and that the clash of police culture and victimisation creates a professional experience that may be unique to policing. We invite other researchers to explore and better understand the police-victim overlap and we encourage policy makers and police leaders to recognise the vulnerabilities and challenges that a police identity and culture places on their workforce and to act to reduce their harms.

Notes

1. Police staff are non-warranted professional and support staff members who perform a wide range of duties to support police activities and the organisation. Examples of these roles include, but are not limited to intelligence analysts, call handlers, information technology, forensic science support and human resources.
2. Answered 'yes' to the following: Have you ever experienced a relationship in your private life that you feel could be classed as domestic abuse, during the time you have worked for [police force]?

3. Respondents who answered 'yes' to the question in footnote 1 were asked: … what was the nature of the abuse (you can select more than one)? Emotional/Psychological – coercive control/gaslighting/being isolated from family/friends by your partner/ manipulation; Physical abuse – pushing/shoving, hitting/slapping, kicking, strangulation, burning/scalding; Sexual abuse – Rape, forced to watch pornography, being called sexually derogatory names, excessive sexual jealousy/accusations of infidelity; Financial abuse – partner controlling the finances against your will, partner spending your money without permission, partner encouraging debt that you don't want to take on.
4. The unweighted sample has been obscured to maintain the anonymity of the force, which was a condition of our being permitted to use the data.
5. Approximately 30 respondents who were eligible to respond to this item indicated that they did not report the incident.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Anderson, W., and Bauer, B., 1987. Law enforcement officers: the consequences of exposure to violence. *Journal of counseling & development*, 65 (7), 381–384.
Boethius, S., and Åkerström, M., 2020. Revealing hidden realities: disclosing domestic abuse to informal others. *Nordic journal of criminology*, 21 (2), 186–202.
Braun, V., and Clarke, V., 2022. *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. London: Sage.
Brennan, I., *et al*., 2021. Policing a new domestic abuse crime: effects of force-wide training on arrests for coercive control. *Policing and society*, 31 (10), 1153–1167.
Brennan, I., Couto, L., and O'Leary, N., 2023. Prevalence and patterns of domestic abuse victimisation in an English police workforce. *Policing and society*, 33 (6), 703–716. doi:10.1080/10439463.2023.2184817.
Brown, T.C., *et al*., 2020. Playing the game: a qualitative exploration of the female experience in a hypermasculine policing environment. *Police quarterly*, 23 (2), 143–173.
Brown, J., and Silvestri, M., 2019. A police service in transformation: implications for women police officers. *Police practice and research*, 21 (5), 459–475.
Burman, M., and Brooks-Hay, O., 2018. Aligning policy and law? The creation of a domestic abuse offence incorporating coercive control. *Criminology & criminal justice*, 18 (1), 67–83.
Christie, N., 1986. The ideal victim. *In*: E.A. Fattah, ed. *From crime policy to victim policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 17–30.
College of Policing. 2018. *Responding to trauma in policing: a practical guide*. College of Policing. https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-02/responding-to-trauma-in-policing.pdf.
Dheensa, S., *et al*, 2022. Healthcare professionals' own experiences of domestic violence and abuse: a meta-analysis of prevalence and systematic review of risk markers and consequences. *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, doi:10.1177/15248380211061771.
Duggan, M., 2018. Idealising' domestic violence victims. *In*: M. Duggan, ed. *Revisiting the 'ideal victim'*. Bristol: Policy Press, 159–174.
Edwards, A.M., and Kotera, Y., 2021. Mental health in the UK police force: a qualitative investigation into the stigma with mental illness. *International journal of mental health and addiction*, 19, 1116–1134.
Ellrich, K., and Baier, D., 2016. The influence of personality on violent victimization – a study on police officers. *Psychology, crime & law*, 22 (6), 538–560.
Epstein, D., and Goodman, L., 2019. Discounting women: doubting domestic violence survivors' credibility and dismissing their experiences. *University of Pennsylvania law review*, 167, 399–462.
Foley, J., *et al*., 2022. 'Getting on with the job': a systematised literature review of secondary trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in policing within the United Kingdom (UK). *The Police Journal*, 95 (1), 224–252. doi:10.1177/0032258X21990412.
Fox, F., *et al*., 2009. What happens when doctors are patients? Qualitative study of GPs. *British journal of general practice*, 59 (568), 811–818.
Gadd, D., *et al*., 2003. Equal victims or the usual suspects? Making sense of domestic abuse against men. *International review of victimology*, 10, 95–116.
Grant, S. and Rowe, M, 2011. Running the risk: police officer discretion and family violence in New Zealand. *Policing and society*, 21 (1), 49–66. doi:10.1080/10439463.2010.540662.
Health and Safety Executive . 2020 Violence at work statistics, 2020. Bootle: Health and Safety Executive https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causinj/violence/work-related-violence-report.pdf.
HMIC. 2014. *Everyone's business: improving the police response to domestic abuse*. HMIC. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/improving-the-police-response-to-domestic-abuse.pdf.

HMICFRS. 2021. *Domestic violence and abuse*. HMICFRS. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/article/domestic-violence-and-abuse/ [Accessed 8 Feb 2023].

HMICFRS. 2022. *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service*. HMICFRS. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/inspection-of-vetting-misconduct-and-misogyny-in-the-police.pdf.

Home Office. 2023a. *Police workforce, England and Wales: 31 March 2022*. Home Office. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/police-workforce/latest.

Home Office. 2023b. *Responses to 'Police perpetrated domestic abuse: Report on the CWJ super complaint'*. Home Office. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responses-to-police-perpetrated-domestic-abuse-report-on-the-cwj-super-complaint.

Hoyle, C., 1998. *Negotiating domestic violence: police, criminal justice, and victims*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2003. *Discussion paper on IACP's policy on domestic violence by police officers: a product of the IACP police response to violence against women project*. http://www.ncdsv.org/images/IACP_Discussion-paper-on-IACP's-policy-on-DV-by-police-officers_7-2003.pdf.

Javaid, A., 2020. The unheard victims: gender, policing and sexual violence. *Policing and society*, 30 (4), 412–428.

Kilatya, J.M., and Kavivya, C., 2021. Police victimization and insecurity in Mathare North Nairobi City County, Kenya. *International journal of current aspects*, 5 (4), 52–63.

Kim, C. and Ferraresso, R, 2022. Factors associated with willingness to report intimate partner violence (IPV) to police in South Korea. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37 (13-14), NP10862–NP10882. doi:10.1177/0886260521990837.

Kim , C. and Ferraresso , R, 2022. Factors Associated With Willingness To Report Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) to Police in South Korea. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37 (13-14), NP10862–NP10882. doi:10.1177/0886260521990837. Epub 2021 Feb 1. PMID: 33522369.

Kunst, M., Popelier, L., and Varekamp, E., 2015. Victim satisfaction with the criminal justice system and emotional recovery: a systematic and critical review of the literature. *Trauma violence and abuse*, 16 (3), 336–358.

Loftus, B., 2010. *Police culture in a changing world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacGregor, J.C.D., *et al.*, 2022. Women's experiences of the intersections of work and intimate partner violence: a review of qualitative research. *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, 23 (1), 224–240.

Mawby, R.C., and Zempi, I., 2018. Police officers' experiences as victims of hate crime. *Policing: an international journal*, 41 (5), 526–538.

Miller, D. and Porter, C, 1983. Self-blame in victims of violence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39 (2), 139–152.

Myhill, A., 2019. Renegotiating domestic violence: police attitudes and decisions concerning arrest. *Policing and society*, 29 (1), 52–68.

Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Domestic abuse and the criminal justice system, England and Wales: November 2021*. Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseandthecriminaljusticesystemenglandandwales/november2021.

Office for National Statistics. 2022a. *Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2022*. Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2022#:~:text=The%20CSEW%20estimated%202.4%20million,women%20and%203.0%25%20men).

Office for National Statistics. 2022b. *Partner abuse in detail: year ending March 2022 [data set]*. Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/partnerabuseindetailappendixtables/yearendingmarch2022/partnerabuseindetail2022.xlsx.

Pereira, M.E., *et al.*, 2020. Personality characteristics of victims of intimate partner violence: a systematic review. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 52, 101423.

Pitman, T., 2017. Living with coercive control: trapped within a complex web of double standards, double binds and boundary violations. *British journal of social work*, 47 (1), 143–161.

Pogrebin, M. and Poole, E, 1991. Police and tragic events: the management of emotions. *Journal of criminal justice*, 19 (4), 395–403.

Purba, A., and Demou, E., 2019. The relationship between organisational stressors and mental wellbeing within police officers: a systematic review. *Bmc public health*, 19, 1286.

Reich, C.M., Anderson, G.D., and Maclin, R., 2022. Why I didn't report: reasons for not reporting sexual violence as stated on Twitter. *Journal of aggression, maltreatment & trauma*, 31 (4), 478–496.

Reiner, R., 2000. *The politics of the police*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reiser, M., and Geiger, S.P., 1984. Police officer as victim. *Professional psychology: research and practice*, 15 (3), 315–323.

Reynolds, P.D., Helfers, R.C., and Upshaw, J., 2021. Victimization, perceived organizational support and perceived danger among police officers. *Journal of theoretical & philosophical criminology*, 13, 11–28.

Sal, S., 2002. Serious problem: when the police become the victim of criminals. In: M. Pagon, ed. *Policing in central and Eastern Europe: deviance, violence, and victimization*. Ljubljana: College of Police and Security Studies, 527–539.

Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland. 2015. *Not now, not ever putting an end to domestic and family violence in Queensland*. Queensland Government. https://www.publications.qld.gov.au/ckan-

publications-attachments-prod/resources/533db62b-b2c9-43cc-a5ff-f9e1bc95c7c7/dfv-report-vol-one.pdf?ETag=c69c3ef47071a137ddbaedb49f7fe468.

Stalans, L.J., and Finn, M.A., 2006. Public's and police officers' interpretation and handling of domestic violence cases: divergent realities. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 21, 1129–1155.

Stark, E., 2018. Coercive control as a framework for responding to male partner abuse in the UK: Opportunities and challenges. *In*: N. Lombard, ed. *Routledge handbook of gender and violence*. Abingdon: Routledge, 15–27.

Terry, G., and Hayfield, N., 2021. *Essentials of thematic analysis*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Thompson, W.T., *et al*., 2001. Challenge of culture, conscience, and contract to general practitioners' care of their own health: qualitative study. *BMJ*, 323 (7315), 728–731.

Westmarland, L., 2001. *Gender and policing: sex, power and police culture*. Cullompton: Willan.

Westmarland, L., 2017. Putting their bodies on the line: police culture and gendered physicality. *Policing: a journal of policy and practice*, 11 (3), 301–317.

Wetendorf, D. and Davis, D. 2015. The misuse of police powers in officer-involved domestic violence. VAWNet. https://web.archive.org/web/20150918202829/http://www.abuseofpower.info/Wetendorf_Misuse2015.pdf

Xu, H, 2022. A qualitative study: emotional damage to police victims in China. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37 (15–16), NP12933–NP12953. doi:10.1177/0886260520983256.